

7-26-26 sermon

Genesis 29.15-30

Just as was the case last week, the Lectionary chooses to end the reading two verses before the actual end of this part of Jacob's story. *It* ends with, "...then Laban gave him his daughter as a wife." Rather than with, "So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years." I imagine many of you were only listening with one ear to everything that came after that part where Jacob didn't know who he was in bed with! We have questions. Let me back up just a bit, and describe how we got here.

Last week we left Jacob in the wilderness after having a wild dream on his way to his uncle Laban's. As he enters the region where Haran is, he arrives at a well, where shepherds are watering their flocks. He sees a young woman approach with her own flock and somehow realizes this is a kinswoman. He waters her flock for her, then tells her he is the son of her father's sister – they're cousins! She runs to tell her father, and we read, "When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house." Jacob brings the news about Rebekah, and Laban declares, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" Jacob spends a month with them – they're off to a great start. But this moment of male bonding does not prepare us for what follows, as we heard in this morning's reading.

It certainly starts off casting Laban as a thoughtful, caring uncle. "Now, Jacob, I'm not going to let you work for me for nothing. Tell me: what should your wages be?" Jacob's a shepherd, and he probably picks up where he left off at home, now helping to care for the flocks of Laban. I'm sure working alongside Rachel was also no hardship. Maybe Laban had picked up on that. Or perhaps Jacob had told Laban from the beginning that Rebekah had sent him to her brother to find a wife. Whatever the case, Jacob responds to Laban's question by saying, "I will serve you for seven years if you'll let me marry your younger daughter Rachel." The storyteller had just described Laban's two daughters: the elder is Leah; the younger, Rachel. The New Revised Standard Version tells us: "Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful." You'll notice there's a footnote in the NRSV about the description of Leah's eyes. Most translations say something like, "Leah's eyes were weak" or "soft." The Hebrew word is difficult to translate. Whatever the word means, perhaps a contemporary equivalent might be, "Rachel was graceful and beautiful, and her older sister Leah had a lovely personality." "Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, 'I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.'" Which he did, and those seven years "seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her." The verse that launched a hundred Christian romance books, and more than a few Hallmark Christmas movies, I'm sure.

Now, lest we miss what the storyteller is clearly trying to communicate, let me remind you that Rachel is the *younger* daughter. Jacob has arrived at his uncle's, presumably penniless after fleeing for his life, with no way to pay a bride price. But now he has paid his seven years' labor to acquire the love of his life, Rachel. Seven years is a long time to wait. So, he comes to Laban and says, "Give me my wife, that I may take her to bed, for my time of waiting is up." And here is where the 'girl meets boy, boy falls in love' plotline takes a dramatic turn! Laban gathers

everyone together and throws a feast, which presumably serves as the wedding. Jacob goes to his tent, knowing his seven-year itch is about to be scratched. Laban brings his daughter to Jacob, and... This is the part that Christian romance novels usually describe in a single sentence, as does the bible. But it's the *wrong* daughter. It's Leah! One wonders exactly what happened in the tent that night! Specifically, how did Jacob *not* know it was Leah, and not the love of his life, Rachel.

As I said, we have questions.

Perhaps the feasting included drinking. A *lot* of drinking. Perhaps the tent was especially dark. Perhaps Jacob didn't stop to wonder why Rachel didn't offer any sweet nothings of her own in response to his murmurings in the dark. All we know is what verse 25 tells us: "When morning came it was Leah!" And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me?" To which Laban responds, "This is not done in our country – giving the younger before the firstborn." To which one might assume Jacob would have responded, "Well, that's something you might have mentioned *seven years ago*!" And then we hear these words:

"Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also
in return for serving me for another seven years."

Laban could almost be making a business deal for a couple of his sheep! No names, no emotion, just making a deal. "I know you're not excited about *this* one, but she's owed the whole week of the wedding. So do your duty to her, then you can have the *other* one. But, you'll have to give me another seven years of labor for her." The Lectionary reading ends with, "Jacob did so, and complete her week;" – notice again that Leah is not named – "then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife." All's well that ends well in the Lectionary. The twists and turns that threaten to keep star-crossed lovers from being together are resolved, and the graceful, beautiful young woman gets her man. Or, as was actually the case, the man gets the love of his life. And they live happily ever after. Except, of course, for the presence of "*the other one*." But the Lectionary glosses over that – again. Because this chapter of the story ends with these words,

"So Jacob went into Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah.
He served Laban for another seven years."

And that's where we leave them, as the Lectionary doesn't come back to the story of these two sisters. The deceiver is deceived. The trickster is tricked, in deeply ironic ways. After all, it was Esau's unbridled appetite that led to him giving away his birthright. "If I don't eat, I'll die!" Now we have Jacob saying, "My seven years are up, it's time for bed!" And Jacob stole the firstborn's blessing through a case of mistaken identity. His father Isaac, almost blind and confused, saying, when Jacob kneels at his bedside, goatskins wrapped around his forearms, "Well, you sound like Jacob, but you feel and smell like Esau." And what do you know, here's Jacob with his own case of mistaken identity. Jacob had taken the birthright of the eldest son, and now the eldest daughter is forced upon him. Not his Rachel, she of beauty and grace. But Leah, she of the weak eyes, the "interesting personality."

What is missing in this story?

All kinds of things! Where is the sisters' mother? Is she alive? Dead? Apparently she's irrelevant as far as the narrator is concerned. How did Rachel feel about Jacob? Did those seven years pass "as but a day" for her also? Or Leah, for that matter? What did she feel about all this? How did she feel about gaining a husband in this way – by deception? Not being chosen – but being given: "Complete the week of this one." We don't know if there was *already* some kind of rivalry between the two sisters. If Laban really believed that the only way Leah would find a husband was to get a man drunk and dupe him into believing she was her beautiful sister, then had Rachel despaired of ever getting married herself, as the younger daughter? "No one's going to want her, so where does that leave me?" Or, maybe, the two sisters *initiated* all this. Maybe *this* was the way they decided that Leah could finally get married. Which would open up the way for Rachel as well.

So many gaps in the story. So many questions.

But one thing's for certain. This story is told from *Jacob's* perspective. Rachel's feelings for Jacob are never described. Even when women are front and center in the action in scripture, these stories are written from (and primarily for) a *male* perspective. The story also illustrates the common practice of reducing people – women in particular – to their physical appearance: Rachel was beautiful; there was something odd about Leah's eyes. Finally, who else is missing from this story? God! The God who made those extravagant promises to Jacob on the way to Haran is now utterly absent from the story for the next 14 years, apparently. All we have is this exiled trickster son-in-law, an equally deceptive father-in-law, and two sisters, who will spend the next several years competing for their shared husband's affection, and for the sons they long for. Sons who will, in time, come aplenty, from these two sisters and their two servants, twelve sons in fact, who will become the twelve tribes of Israel. Hardly a story full of the kind of faith and faithfulness we would expect of the Patriarchs. But certainly the story we have received.

Well, what's the good news in a story that doesn't even mention God?

What's the word of hope in a story such as this? Perhaps, in time, Jacob did come to love Leah as well. Certainly he's not opposed to taking her to bed more than that *first* time! The sisters – while fiercely competitive for Jacob's attention – are inseparable, until Rachel dies in childbirth on the road to Bethlehem, and is buried there, Jacob raising another pillar, this time to mark her grave. Leah also dies, sometime later. Jacob buries her alongside the graves of Abraham and Sarah; where Isaac and Rebekah are also buried.

At the very end of the book of Genesis, when Jacob is now living in Egypt, and dying, he will gather his twelve sons around him and make them promise that they will not bury him there, in Egypt, but that they will bury him in the land of his ancestors, at the tomb of the patriarchs.

Jacob will not be buried with Rachel.

He will be buried with Leah.

Amen, and amen.